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ABSTRACT

In many areas in the United States the educational scene now comprises two separate systems; one designed to meet the needs of the "normal learner," and the other consisting of a maze of legislated assistance programs for the "special learner." However, there are not two distinct types of students. What is needed is a unified system of education in which general and special education resources are merged to provide for individual differences among all students while conserving human and fiscal resources wasted in a double system. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory has established demonstration sites at five low income, rural schools to explore strategies for total school improvement. At these schools, a common schoolwide knowledge base was developed through professional development for all administrators and teachers on effective schools research, the school improvement process, team building; and methods to increase student success. Inservice training was provided on attention deficit disorders, learning difficulties, behavior management, at-risk strategies, teacher assistance teams, and cooperative learning. Teams were formed to address improvement issues and identify special student needs within regular education. One team provided direct assistance to any student not experiencing success, with the focus on the specific student problem, not labeling and program placement. Support systems for students included peer tutoring and a buddy system between teachers and at-risk students. The special education teacher assumed the role of support facilitator for regular educators and the mainstreaming process. This paper contains 28 references. (SV)

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Adjusting the System Instead of the Individual to Meet Student Needs

The recent emphasis on effective schools and excellence in education has affected our expectations for all students best characterized in the phrase, "all children can learn." In particular it has affected our expectations for those students labeled as handicapped and at-risk. Recent national reports on the quality of education have increased the emphasis on the failure of schools to educate all children through the reform of general education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Our educational system is failing to meet the needs of the ever increasing numbers of students with learning problems (Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy, 1983). What are alternatives to the current system? How can we institute changes within the system in some ways to meet the needs of our diverse population of students labeled handicapped or at-risk? What can we do specifically in our rural settings where resources are at a premium? This paper will present a viable alternative that rural schools can use in educating students within the current system. This alternative makes modifications within the system using tested strategies and utilizes teacher collaboration and problem solving.

Mainstreaming

A continuing issue in general education has been how to serve children with special needs and other at-risk populations within the mainstream in ways that are successful. Increased focus on effective "mainstreaming" (the placement of students with academic and physical handicaps in regular schools and classrooms) for special students has gained considerable attention (Gottlieb, 1981; Heller, 1983; Madden & Slavin, 1983). Research in the area of mainstreaming favors placement in regular classes using individualized instruction or group instruction in the regular classroom, supplemented by well designed support programs for behavior, achievement, self-concept and emotional adjustment (Wang, 1982). Studies have indicated that handicapped students engaging in cooperative learning with non-handicapped peers interact more successfully with each other when in regular classroom settings (Madden & Slavin, 1983). Slavin, Madden and Leavey (1982) reported that significantly greater levels of achievement are also evident for the special education student in cooperative learning classrooms. In these cooperative learning classrooms achievement improves for <u>all</u> students in the group. Unfortunately, current mainstreaming practices for handicapped students have been inconclusive in their results concerning other issues (Gottlieb, 1981; Polloway, 1984). The one consistent finding has been that mainstreaming works when regular classroom teachers are able to adapt instruction for the special students in their classrooms (Madden & Slavin, 1983). Regular classroom teachers must have the strong and coordinated backing of

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special education teachers and support personnel. Regular educators, with the proper training and resources can successfully modify or adapt instructional practices to meet a wide range of student needs by organizing individualized programming, cooperative activities, and adaptive learning environments in regular education settings (Slavin, Leavey, & Madden, 1984; Wang & Walberg, 1983). When these modifications are made many students with diverse learning handicaps including those referred to as at-risk can be educated successfully within mainstream education (Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Madden & Slavin, 1983; Slavin, Madden & Leavey, 1984; Wang, 1980, 1981, 1982).

"Mainstreaming has become one of the more complex changes on the current educational scene and as such it exemplifies the need for true educational change and the magnitude of the task in bringing about major educational reform in this particular area" (Fullen, 1982, p, 34). The changes needed within the system are very basic in nature. Some suggested changes are: role relationships between regular and special educators; the relationship between school personnel and professionals outside the school; training of regular and special education professionals; and administrative backing of the change effort.

The Dilemma: Two Systems, One Student

Unfortunately in many areas, we now have in place two separate educational systems for the education of special needs students; this constitutes a systems problem of great proportion. One system was designed to meet the needs of the "normal learner" while the other system has evolved to meet the needs of the "special learner." Through legislation and federal funding we have developed programs such as special education, Chapter I, bilingual education, vocational education and dropout prevention. These assistance programs are from different legislation, have different funding patterns, different rules and regulations (Chalfant, 1987). There are approximately 42 federal programs targeted for handicapped students alone while the budget for these programs is in excess of 36 billion dollars. Students must qualify for such programs by meeting certain criteria and guidelines. We have now added another category, at-risk, to deal with the rest of the unsuccessful learners that do not fit into the already existing categories. We are now receiving monies for the at-risk category that is loosely defined as, "any student not experiencing success in school."

Stainback and Stainback (1984) remarked that "there are not two distinct types of students (regular and special) regardless of any designated cutoffs. All students differ to varying degrees from one another along the same continuums of difference" (p. 102). They have suggested that what should exist is a single, unified system of education in which general and special education expertise and resources are merged to provide for individual differences among all students to conserve human and fiscal resources required by the double, often duplicate, system (Greenburg, 1987). Lieberman (1985) views the current nationwide initiatives of school effectiveness and excellence in education as "upholding the nature of the system, standards, and grades above the individual" (p. 516). He suggests that the goals of special education should be met through the continuation of the dual system "with each party maintaining a strong sense of individual identity, while creating an ideal

interface between the two" (p. 516). Stainback and Stainback (1984) argue however that continuation of the dual system would result in competition rather than cooperation among professionals. They point out that the "dual system has affected preservice training of personnel, created barriers to direct service programs, confused research findings and divided resources, personnel and advocacy potential" (p. 105). Instead, an educational systems collaboration would result in the following: a refocus of the preparation and assignment of personnel by instructional categories; a general heterogeneous grouping of students with homegeneous grouping by instructional needs for specific courses only; support personnel attention to appropriate student program planning rather than to classification eligibility; school funding by program element rather than the categories of exceptionality; and most importantly, viewing a specific individual difference as one of the the student's characteristics to be considered rather than an educational disability around which planning occurs (Greenburg, 1987, p. 5).

A variety of collaborative supports between regular and special education have begun to develop. Collaborative support is being provided through cooperative or team teaching (Bauwens, Hourcade & Friend, 1989) and by involving specialists, students, parents and administrators who provide suggestions and assistance through informal and formal collaboration with task forces or teams (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1988; Haydek, 1987; West & Idol, 1987). Cooperative learning, peer tutoring and buddy systems also provide support (Sapon-Shevin, 1987). Specialists are moving from the traditional, isolated service delivery mode that removes a student from regular class instruction toward employing more integrative services models that involve collaboration between all teachers to incorporate services into the regular classroom programs (Stainback, Stainback & Harris, 1989; Meyer & Skrtic, 1988).

Professional peer collaboration, an approach designed to involve a teacher, peer or colleague of the teacher in mutual support, has shown positive results in classroom teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming. Through professional peer collaboration an increase in the effectiveness of prereferral strategies has been shown (Pugach & Johnson, 1987).

Special Rural Concerns

Rural schools have their own distinct special educational environments. A third of the nation's population lives in rural areas that have much higher levels of poverty. Approximately 30 percent of the farm population and 24 percent of the non-farm population lives in poverty (Rodgers & Burge, 1984). Their communities are increasing while the tax bases are not. Rural schools may serve greater percentages of handicapped children at higher service costs due to transportation and scarce professional resources (Helge, 1984). Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, the number of rural public school handicapped children identified and served has increased by 92 percent (Helge, 1984).

Rural special educators have the same types of mainstreaming difficulties but with the added problems of rural special education: there is a lack of specialized available services; schools frequently hire unqualified personnel via temporary certification; interagency collaboration is hampered by long distances or isolation.

Problems traditionally associated with implementing comprehensive special programs are compounded in rural areas by scattered populations, and vast geographic distances. Inadequate services are obstacles to program development particularly when highly trained personnel and specialized facilities and equipment are required (Helge, 1985).

A Rural Success Story: Change Within the System

Both regular and special educators have expressed a need for a more comprehensive range of service delivery for mainstreamed and at-risk students who are failing within the existing educational framework. Rural special education is especially in need for services within their own system due to scattered populations, geographic isolation and lack of available specialized services.

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's (SEDL) long term goal of Programmatic Theme on Improving School and Classroom Productivity is to promote improvement and productivity in the region for all students so that instruction and school managment improves and student learning increases. A multi-year effective schools effort provided the context for exploring strategies for successful total school improvement in low income, rural, resource bound schools. The project identified a school in each state of the region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas) to serve as a "demonstration site." Each demonstration site was small, rural, resource bound, economically disadvantaged and interested in improving student achievement. The activities and events related to site selection, negotiation for work at the site, planning for the school improvement project, and implementation of campus improvement efforts have been documented by a specified SEDL liaison/external change facilitator/consultant responsible for facilitating the total school improvement process. The site liaison conducted school improvement activities with the site leadership team and State Department of Education representative. A team effort on the part of state agencies, business, community, parents, the school and SEDL was formed.

Adminstrator and Faculty Training

Professional development to the entire school of adminstrators and faculty in the effective schools research, school improvement process, team building and methods to increase student success was provided to both regular and special educators to establish a common knowledge base in general school-wide effectiveness. Professional literature in the areas of educational leadership, school improvement, data interpretation, team building and current successful special education practices was shared with the demonstration school. Administrators and faculty were kept current while new program ideas were disseminated to all teachers. In particular, specific inservice training was provided to all faculty members on the following topics: Attention Deficit Disorders; Identification and Remediation of Students with Learning Difficulties; Behavior Management; At-Risk Strategies; Teacher Assistance Teams; Cooperative Learning.

Leadership development was facilitated at the site by modeling appropriate behaviors by the change facilitator and by off site inservice training of both the

administrators, leadership teams and teacher leaders. Assistance was provided to the administrators in long and short term planning and in generating goals and objectives for particular projects concerning mainstream students. All inservice training was site based and specific to the expressed needs of the school.

Collaboration and Team Approach

A Leadership Team was formed to address school-wide improvement issues, examine school test results, plan and implement school action plans. In addition, subteams were formed to correspond to the effective schools correlates: climate; parent involvement; instructional focus, measuring and monitoring. These subteams examined in depth particular school issues related to their particular correlate and planned school improvement projects related to that particular correlate. Indicators of success were developed by each correlate team to identify, specifically, special student needs in the regular education. Most importantly, the needs of special students shifted from emphasis on a particular program (special education) to increased emphasis at the building level (total program) using the effective schools and school improvement process model.

A procedure for involving the key staff members in all prereferral assessments and reviews was developed. A formal "plan of action" is now drafted before a student is referred for special education testing. This plan of action often entails specific changes in the students instruction or behavior planning for a set period of time. These changes are agreed upon by the prereferral commitee and instituted within the regular education mainstream for a particular period of time when it is again reviewed by the same commitee. The committe provided on-going assistance to the regular classroom teachers involved.

Another team was formed (School Assistance Team) to provide direct assistance to special and regular students who were not experiencing success in class. This School Assistance Team received training in areas such as behavior management, cooperative learning and learning strategies. These team members review each individual case as it is brought to the committee's attention. The committee then provides the classroom teacher strategies to deal with the particular problem. Interventions were made with students and parents of special and regular education students. Again, the focus was on the specific student problem, not labeling and program placement. Teachers and administrators realized that they had the capability in their own school, with the right training, to successfully problem solve together.

Student-Peer/Teacher-Student Collaboration

Students in the mainstream can often support each other through peer tutoring (Stainback, Stainback & Harris, 1989). Specifically, peers may be more effective teachers than adults for some types of instruction (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1981). Peers in the demonstration school were utilized in a homework center in which older students tutored younger students. Peer tutoring was also utilized in first and second grade with students of the same age group.

Another successful collaborative procedure that was utilized in the school was the facilitation of a buddy system between teachers and identified students at-risk.

Teachers were paired with two at-risk students and became their personal friend and counselor. This pairing met with particular success. Students identified with a particular teacher as a "special friend" and helpmate.

Role Changes for Special Education

Stainback, Stainback and Harris (1989) have suggested that the special educators role should change to that of a support facilitator to better support mainstreaming efforts. In this rural demonstration school, the special educator assumed the role of a support facilitator by: opening the lines of communication between special and regular educators; providing information and technical assistance to regular edcators; discussing specific student problems with the regular educators thus problem solving together; and actively serving on both the School Leadership Team and School Assistance Team with regular educators. The special education teacher serving as a support facilitator was involved in the development of other support systems with the regular teachers. This included such things as adapting the mainstream environments or arranging outside special assistance for the teacher. The special education teacher also provided on site technical assistance for regular education teachers which included a monthly newsletter on "hard to teach/hard to reach best practices."

Implications for the Future

If successful integration of regular and special education is to be made a reality, a number of research areas are of immediate concern. Possibly the most important area for intensive research concerns attitude formation. For all students, regular and special, to benefit from mainstreaming, schools must create a school climate and culture in which all students can develop positive and realistic attitudes about each other. The translation of this current information into successful strategies and programs awaits the research community.

Training will need to be provided to all teachers on best mainstreaming practices or "what works." Many teachers who are currently involved with special education students in the mainstream have received little training or experience in this area. Ongoing staff development is essential to guarantee effective teaching practices in the classroom for all students. Better preparation of special and regular education teachers to assume the role of support facilitator and team member will be needed at the university level.

Further research into the instructional process is needed if the special education student is to be successfully mainstreamed into regular education. Although the importance of individualized instruction has been demonstrated recently, the question still arises as to what is the best integration of group instruction and group learning with individualized instruction. Instructional practices that would best facilitate mainstreaming are still under question. Research into the kinds and amount of support required by regular classroom teachers to support successful mainstreaming efforts within the mainstream is also needed.

Finally, projects such as described in this paper should be replicated in other rural special education settings. The strategies utilized by this particular school district

in this project have been suggested in the literature for a number of years. Few studies document whether interventions were successful and if so, to what degree. More importantly, field based studies are needed to provide the many answers that are so desperately needed, that would ensure the success of all students.

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